

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
EA Number CA-660-05-30**

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**DATE:** March 21, 2005

**TITLE/PROJECT TYPE:** Big Morongo Canyon Clean-Up

**BLM OFFICE:** Palm Springs South Coast Field Office  
690 W. Garnet Avenue, P.O. Box 581260  
North Palm Springs, CA 92258-1260

**APPLICANT/PROPONENT:** BLM

**LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION:** Big Morongo Canyon ACEC,  
T2S, R4E, Section 10, SBM

**PROJECT ACREAGE:** BLM 2 acres

**USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP:** Desert Hot Springs 7.5 minute quad

**LAND USE PLAN CONFORMANCE and Other Regulatory Compliance:**

In accordance with Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-3, the proposed action and alternatives are in conformance with the following approved land use plan: **California Desert Conservation Area Plan (1980), as amended.**

Fish and Wildlife Consultation

The USFWS was consulted informally during this process. A determination of beneficial affect was made by the BLM and the USFWS and formal consultation was not required. See attached e-mail from Pete Sorenson, USFWS, Carlsbad.

Cultural Resources Review

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as implemented at 36 CFR Part 800, requires Federal agencies to take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties. The 2004 State Protocol Agreement between the California State Director of the BLM and the California State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) defines the roles and relationships between SHPO's office and BLM under the National Programmatic Agreement. The protocol streamlines the Section 106 process by not requiring case-by-case consultation with the SHPO on most individual undertakings. Consultation with the California State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) will not be required for the proposed project.

## **NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION**

Illegal dumping on public lands in the canyons on the north side of the Coachella Valley is an on-going problem. Abandoned cars, targets set up for shooting practice and household and construction garbage are dumped along the washes. The proposed clean-up of Morongo Canyon Trailhead is an opportunity for the BLM to collaborate with public land users and area youth to protect public land resources. Subsequent clean-ups and enforcement efforts by the Bureau of Land Management will help ensure that the canyon remains a clean and safe place to recreate.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES**

### Background

Illegal dumping at the mouth of Big Morongo Canyon is an on-going environmental concern. Dumping has continued to occur at a site popular with hikers and horseback riders. Big Morongo Canyon is closed to motorized vehicles and is gated. The parking area has been used for unsupervised target shooting and illegal dumping.

### A. Proposed Action

The Bureau of Land Management proposes to remove accumulated combustible and non-combustible debris and garbage from public lands at the parking area leading into Big Morongo Canyon. Debris will be removed by hand and placed in a dumpster on site. The dumpster will be removed at the conclusion of the project. No heavy equipment would be used.

The project would occur on April 2, 2005, as part of National Trails Day. Volunteers will contribute their labor to the clean-up effort. "No Dumping" signs will be installed on public lands near the gate at the mouth of Big Morongo Canyon.

### B. No Action Alternative

The Proposed Action would not be undertaken. Existing management and use of the site would continue subject to applicable statutes, regulation, policy and land use plans.

## **AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

### 1. Area Description

Big Morongo Canyon runs north to south in the Little San Bernardino Mountains, Riverside County, California. The site is within the Big Morongo Canyon ACEC. The Big Morongo Canyon Trailhead provides access to the Big Morongo Canyon Trail which is utilized by both horse riders and hikers. The canyon is closed to motorized vehicles. The dominant plants species are creosote (*Larrea tridentata*), Cheese Bush, and Brittle Bush. The area may provide habitat for the desert tortoise, though if present, tortoises would be at very low densities.

## Cultural Resources

During the ethnographic period the Serrano occupied the Morongo Valley area and the Cahuilla occupied the Coachella Valley and surrounding mountains. The Serrano followed a lifestyle similar to their Cahuilla neighbors and engaged in trade and social exchange with them. Villages for both groups were usually established near a reliable source of water and within reasonable distance of staple foods and other resources. Covington Park and Big Morongo Preserve are the location of a previously recorded archaeological site. In 1971 P. Wilke recorded the presence of a “large camp of some permanence”. The available water and diverse plant resources would have made the location attractive for occupation. Wilke reported that even at that time, the site had been damaged by artifact collecting and much of it had been plowed. Cahuilla occupation sites are recorded as having occurred in the oases along the Indio Hills.

Until the establishment of Highway 62 in the 1930’s, Big Morongo Canyon was the location of a road that connected Desert Hot Springs and the Morongo Valley. During the 1930’s construction of the Colorado River Aqueduct occurred through the foothills of the Little San Bernardino Mountains. While the aqueduct itself did not enter into Big Morongo Canyon, wells were placed in the canyon to provide water for construction.

## Visual Resource Management

In accordance with the California Desert Conservation Area Plan Amendment for the Coachella Valley (2002), public lands in Big Morongo Canyon Preserve are designated as Visual Resource Management Class 2. The management objective of this class is to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. Any changes must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

### 2. Land Status

1. **Land Use Classification:** The involved lands are designated as Multiple-Use Class L (limited use). Class L lands are managed to provide for lower-intensity, carefully controlled multiple use of resources, while ensuring that sensitive values are not significantly diminished.
2. **Valid Existing Rights:** There are no valid existing rights affected by this proposed action.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

### A. Critical Elements

The following table summarizes potential impacts to various elements of the human environment, including the "critical elements" listed in BLM Manual H-1790-1, Appendix 5, as amended. Elements for which there are no impacts will not be discussed further in this document.

Environmental Element	Proposed Action	No Action Alternative
Air Quality	No impacts	No impacts
ACEC's	Beneficial affect to ACEC	Refuse would remain.
Cultural Resources	No impacts	No impacts
Native American Concerns	N/A	N/A
Farmlands	N/A	N/A
Floodplains	No impacts	No impacts
Energy (E.O. 13212)	N/A	N/A
Minerals	N/A	N/A
T&E Animal Species	May affect Desert Tortoise	No impact
T&E Plant Species	May affect.	May affect
Invasive, Nonnative Species	No impact	No impact
Wastes (hazardous/solid)	N/A	N/A
Water Quality (surface and ground)	No impact	No impact
Wetlands/Riparian Zones	N/A	N/A
Wild and Scenic Rivers	N/A	N/A
Wilderness	N/A	N/A
Environmental Justice	N/A	N/A
Health and Safety Risks to Children	N/A	N/A
Visual Resource Mgmt.	Conforms to VRM Class 2 management objectives	Does not conform to VRM Class 2 management objectives

B. Discussion of Impacts

**1. Proposed Action:**

**Cultural Resources**

Big Morongo Canyon may have served as a route of travel connecting the territories of the Serrano and Cahuilla people. A Class III cultural resources inventory conducted as part of the Coachella Valley Plan Amendment planning process (Chambers 2003) identified a single sherd of pottery in Big Morongo Canyon. Bedrock milling features and additional pottery sherds have been recorded in the area around the mouth of Big Morongo Canyon. A Class III cultural resources inventory of the project area was conducted on March 30, 2005 by Wanda Raschkow, PSSCFO Archaeologist, and Aaron Kind, PSSCFO Archaeological Technician with assistance from Mona Daniels, PSSCFO Recreation Specialist, and members of the SCA restoration team. No historic or prehistoric cultural materials were identified.

**T&E Animal Species**

No disturbance or impact to desert tortoise is anticipated. However, if present, tortoises may be disturbed by the activity as would other small reptiles and mammals. In order to avoid any disturbance to Desert Tortoises, the mitigation measures identified below must be implemented (see attached Desert tortoise mitigation measures).

**T&E Plant Species**

Coachella Valley milk vetch (*Astragalus lentiginosus coachellae*) and triple-ribbed milk vetch (*Astragalus tricarinatus*) may be present on site. These species are listed as a federally endangered species. Temporary impacts to plants may result from location of the dumpster and cars parked on site by volunteers.

**VRM**

The proposed action would enhance visual resources by removing non-natural debris which creates contrasts with the characteristic landscape. The proposed clean up would meet VRM Class II objectives and improve the aesthetic values of the landscape. The project would restore the site to a more natural appearance.

**2. No Action Alternative:**

Under this alternative, trash may continue to accumulate in the canyons. Disturbance to small animals and plants could occur from the continue dumping.

Existing visual contrasts of non-natural debris with the characteristic landscape would be retained for no apparent purpose. Debris left at the proposed clean-up sites would attract the attention of the casual observer, thereby maintaining a circumstance where Visual Resource Management Class 2 objectives are not achieved.

C. Mitigation Measures

**Cultural Resources**

If previously unidentified cultural resources are encountered during project activities, all work will cease in the immediate area and the PSSC Cultural Resources Specialist will be notified.

If new cultural resources are discovered, the proponent will notify the appropriate agencies in accordance with State and Federal regulations. Specifically, the proponent will immediately bring to the attention of the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office any previously unidentified cultural resources (prehistoric/historic sites, features or objects) and/or paleontological resources (fossils) encountered during permitted operations and maintain the integrity of such resources pending subsequent investigation.

Actions other than those explicitly approved by the BLM that result in impacts upon archaeological or historical resources would be subject to the provisions of the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, as amended, and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. These statutes protect cultural resources for the benefit of all Americans. As property of the United States, no person may, without authorization, excavate, remove, damage, or otherwise alter or deface any historic or prehistoric site, artifact, or object of antiquity located on public land.

**T&E Animals**

Stipulations from the FWS Biological Opinion for small disturbances of desert tortoise habitat in the California Desert (1-8-97-F-17) would apply to this project. See attached stipulations (Appendix A).

**T&E Plants**

A BLM Restoration Ecologist surveyed the site for Coachella Valley and triple-ribbed milk vetch on April 1. No plants were seen on site. The Restoration Ecologist will monitor site during the project and will take measures to avoid plants if individuals are found.

**VRM**

Surface disturbances created by the project, such as vehicle tracks left from placement of the dumpster, vehicle parking, and denuded areas where debris is removed, shall be treated by raking and other means to minimize visibility.

D. Residual Impacts.

There would be no residual impacts to the site after mitigation measures are taken.

E. Cumulative Impacts

Impacts associated with continued recreational and non-recreational use of the site would continue. Occasional mortality of lizards and small mammals would likely occur from dumping and target shooting at the Big Morongo Canyon trailhead. Despite the installation of “No Dumping” signs, some debris may be purposefully or inadvertently left on site.

**PERSONS / AGENCIES CONSULTED:**

Jeff Ohlfs, Joshua Tree National Park, NPS

Russell Scofield, Habitat Restoration and Illegal Dumping Coordinator, BLM

Pete Sorenson, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Carlsbad

**PREPARED BY:**

Mona Daniels, Outdoor Recreation Planner, BLM

Wanda Raschkow, Cultural Resources Specialist, BLM

**REVIEWED BY:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Environmental Coordinator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix A**

### **Desert Tortoise Mitigation**

Stipulations from Biological Opinion for small disturbances of desert tortoise habitat in the California Desert (1-8-97-F-17) that apply to this project are as follows:

In the following measures, a "qualified biologist" is defined as a trained wildlife biologist who is knowledgeable concerning desert tortoise biology, tortoise mitigation techniques, tortoise habitat requirements, identification of tortoise sign, and procedures for surveying for tortoises. Evidence of such knowledge may include one or more of the following: employment as a field biologist working on desert tortoise or successful completion of a contract dealing with desert tortoise fieldwork. Attendance at the training course sponsored by the Desert Tortoise Council would be a supporting qualification.

An "authorized biologist" is defined as a wildlife biologist who has been authorized to handle desert tortoises. An authorized biologist must be approved by the USFWS, the CDFG, and the BLM (see measure 3).

- 1) Only biologists authorized by the USFWS, CDFG, and the BLM would handle desert tortoises. No handling activities would begin until an authorized biologist is approved. Authorization for handling would be granted under the auspices of the Section 7 consultation.
- 2) The area of disturbance would be confined to the smallest practical area, considering topography, placement of facilities, location of burrows, public health and safety, and other limiting factors. Work area boundaries would be delineated with flagging or other marking to minimize surface disturbance associated with vehicle straying. Special habitat features, such as burrows, identified by the qualified biologist would be avoided to the extent possible. To the extent possible, previously disturbed areas within the project site would be utilized for the stockpiling of excavated materials, storage of equipment, location of office trailers, and parking of vehicles. The qualified biologist, in consultation with the project proponent, would ensure compliance with this measure.
- 3) No new access road would be bladed to the project site. Except when absolutely required by the project and as explicitly stated in the project permit, cross-country vehicle use by employees is prohibited during work and non-work hours.
- 4) Desert tortoises may be handled only by the authorized biologist and only when necessary. In handling desert tortoises, the authorized biologist would follow the techniques for handling desert tortoises in "Guidelines for Handling Desert Tortoises during Construction Projects" (Desert Tortoise Council 1996).



- 5) The authorized biologist would maintain a record of all desert tortoises handled. This information would include for each tortoise:
  1. the locations (narrative and maps) and dates of observations;
  2. general condition and health, including injuries and state of healing and whether animals voided their bladders;
  3. location moved from and location moved to;
  4. diagnostic markings (i.e., identification numbers or marked lateral scutes); and
  5. slide photograph of each handled desert tortoise as described in a previous measure.
- 6) Upon locating a dead or injured tortoise, the project proponent or agent is to notify the BLM Resource Area Office. The BLM must then notify the appropriate field office (Carlsbad or Ventura) of the USFWS by telephone within three days of the finding. Written notification must be made within five days of the finding, both to the appropriate USFWS field office and to the USFWS Division of Law Enforcement in Torrance. The information provided must include the date and time of the finding or incident (if known), location of the carcass or injured animal, a photograph, cause of death, if known, and other pertinent information.
- 7) An injured animal would be transported to a qualified veterinarian for treatment at the expense of the project proponent. If an injured animal recovers, the appropriate field office of USFWS should be contacted for final disposition of the animal.
- 8) The BLM would endeavor to place the remains of intact tortoise carcasses with educational or research institutions holding the appropriate State and Federal permits per their instructions. If such institutions are not available or the animal's remains are in poor condition, the information noted above would be obtained and the carcass left in place. If left in place and sufficient pieces are available, the BLM (or its agent) would attempt to mark the carcass to ensure that it is not reported again. Arrangements for disposition to a museum would be made prior to removal of the carcass from the field.
- 9) Except on county-maintained roads, vehicle speeds would not exceed 20 miles per hour through desert tortoise habitat.
- 10) Workers would inspect for tortoises under a vehicle prior to moving it. If a tortoise is present, the worker will carefully move the vehicle only when necessary, and when the tortoise will not be injured by moving the vehicle. Alternatively, the worker will wait for the tortoise to move out from under the vehicle.
- 11) No dogs will be allowed at a work site in desert tortoise habitat.
- 12) All trash and food items would be promptly contained within closed, raven-proof containers and regularly removed from the project site to reduce the attractiveness of the area to ravens and other tortoise predators.

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**DECISION RECORD  
CA-660-05-30**

**NAME of PROJECT:** Big Morongo Canyon Clean-Up

**DECISION:** It is my decision to approve the proposed action as described in Environmental Assessment (EA) number CA-660-05-30. Compliance with the mitigation measures identified in the EA is hereby required. These measures are incorporated into this decision record as stipulations by reference. A copy of this Decision Record and attendant conditions of approval (stipulations) shall be in the possession of the on-site operator during all undertakings approved herein.

**RATIONALE:** The approved action is in conformance with applicable land use plans and will not cause unnecessary or undue degradation.

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:** Environmental impacts associated with the proposed action have been assessed. Based on the analysis provided in the attached EA, I conclude the approved action is not a major federal action and will result in no significant impacts to the environment under the criteria in Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations 1508.18 and 1508.27. Preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement to further analyze possible impacts is not required pursuant to Section 102(2) (c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969.

**APPROVED BY:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Field Manager  
Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office  
USDI Bureau of Land Management  
690 W. Garnet Avenue, P.O. Box 581260  
North Palm Springs, CA 92258-1260

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date